



TRACING THE ORIGINS OF APPALACHIAN STEREOTYPES IN POPULAR CULTURE: EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY THROUGH THE 1930s

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Abstract:

The present research examines the archetypes and stereotypes associated with the Appalachian Mountains and the Appalachian people from the beginning of the Twentieth Century to the year 1941. It begins with the fictional works of John Fox, Jr., who introduces the Mountain Woman archetype to popular culture and continues up to the 1941 motion picture of WWI hero Alvin York. At the close of this time period, the image constructed of Appalachian people was one that mixed cultural tendencies toward violence with out-sized capabilities as warriors.

Keywords: Appalachian Mountains, Mountain Men, Mountain Women, Violence, Heroism, Ecological Destruction

TRACING THE ORIGINS OF APPALACHIAN STEREOTYPES IN POPULAR CULTURE

The Appalachian Mountains stretch from Georgia to Maine, forming a natural barrier on the Atlantic side of the United States. Dense forests of evergreens, deciduous trees and grassy meadows spread to the horizon. It is at once a beautiful and haunting place that has given rise to myths of heroic action and horrendous depravity. These myths incorporate the archetypes and stereotypes that making up the concept of “Appalachia” within popular culture. The present study focuses on the images used to portray Appalachia from the **outset of the Twentieth Century through the 1930s**. It traces the complex—and often negative – images associated with these mountains and their people, and identifies the origins of stereotypes still associated with Appalachia in the present day.

Humans first came to inhabit this land about 12,000 years ago (Drake 2003). By the early 1500s, when these Native Americans were first encountered by Spaniards Hernando deSoto and Juan Pardo, they had formed into tribal groupings – primarily Cherokee, Huron and Shawnee (Abramson 2020; Hudson 2005). By the early 1600s, British and French settlements on the Atlantic Coast spawned further expeditions to the Appalachians, bringing with them European values and traditions, as well as settlers (Drake 2003). The land came to be viewed no longer as a place to hunt and dwell, but as a resource for obtaining wealth and power (Hurst 2006).

Permanent European settlements were founded in what is now Central Appalachia (Southwestern Virginia, Eastern Tennessee, Western North Carolina, West Virginia and North Georgia) from the early 1700s onward (Rouse 2004) The inhabitants of these pioneer settlements were not primarily British (despite popular belief to the contrary). Instead they consisted of a variety of ethnicities including Spanish, French, Germans, Africans, Gypsy/Roma, Sephardic Jews and Muslim-Moors (Hirschman 2005; Kennedy 1997). Their descendants continued to populate the Appalachians over the next three centuries with little in-flow from other places, forming a largely 'closed' society (Hirschman 2005, Johnson 1997, Kennedy 1997).

A Barrier and Haven

Because of the difficulty of traversing the Appalachian Mountains, settlement across them was slow and uneven. The Cumberland Gap served as one of the first over-mountain passages, opening the way to Kentucky and the West (Rouse 2004). Once the Mississippi River had been reached, and boats could traverse north and south, settlers spread to Louisiana, Texas, Ohio, Illinois, and the Great Plains. Yet as late as 1820, only 1.2% of the US population lived west of the Appalachians; the great majority continuing to dwell on the Atlantic Coast (Abramson 2006).

The early residents of Appalachia made their living by working closely within the structure of the surrounding natural environment. They spun wool and flax into clothes, tanned leather for shoes, coats and saddles, fashioned wood into plows, furniture and housing (Best and Wood 2006, Ewing 2008, Hirschman 2005; . Because the land was steep, rocky and had poor soil, farming was limited to low lying areas, called bottom-lands, near creeks and rivers. Mules and goats were preferred over horses and cattle, because they were sure-footed and could survive on marginal vegetation (Leyburn 1962). Literacy was limited due to the lack of public schools and qualified teachers. Most children left school after acquiring a rudimentary education in order to help out with the family's farm. Corn was the main agricultural crop and used to make grist (corn meal) for baking and distilled to make liquor (Leyburn 1962).

Coal, Iron and Timber.

This isolated lifestyle was dramatically altered in the late 1800s with the discovery of coal and iron ore deposits in the Appalachian region and external demand for Appalachian timber to build railroads, housing and factories. Wide gauge railroads were built that could carry logs, iron ore and coal to distant cities such as Pittsburgh, Detroit, Atlanta and Akron and enormous fortunes were made by "industrial barons" such as Carnegie, Mellon, Ford and Frick (Hurst 2006). Some local families became wealthy, built large, well-furnished mansions and sent their children to be educated 'back East'. But the vast majority of Appalachia's inhabitants remained poor and uneducated. Mineral and timber rights were sold for pennies on their true value (Sokol 2013). An out-migration from Appalachia to the industrial cities of the North and Midwest took place between 1880 and 1930 and saw thousands of residents leave their ancestral homes (Hurst 2006). Some returned, most did not.

The Hillbilly Stereotype

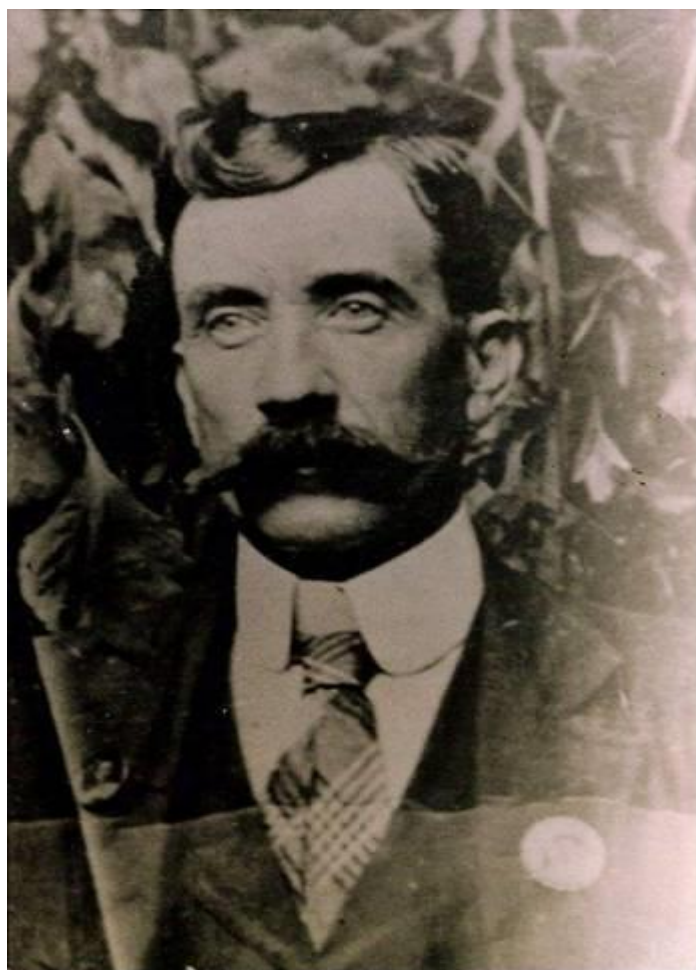
It was at this time that American cultural mythology regarding the Appalachian Region began coalescing around the stereotype of 'violent, ignorant hillbillies' (Drake 2003; Inge 2001). The primary source for this public perception was the popular fiction of John Fox, Jr. Born in eastern Kentucky in 1862, Fox studied English Literature at Transylvania College and Harvard University, graduating in 1883. He became a reporter for several newspapers in New York City and published a successful serialization of his first novel, *A Mountain Europa*, in *Century* magazine in 1892 (see EncyclopediaVirginia.com, "John Fox, Jr.)

His significance for our purposes centers around the novels he wrote in the early 1900s which became the template for American cultural understandings of Appalachia and Appalachian people. The characters he created -- their lifestyles, language usage, physical appearances, food ways, religious practices and political attitudes -- became the template from which later mass media images were struck. Two of his novels, *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* (1903) and *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1908) were made into successful motion pictures during the 1930s. We will discuss them in context with contemporaneous mass media materials of the same time period, e.g., *Li'l Abner*, later in this study. But now let us take a look at the archetypal narrative of Appalachia -- *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. It is in this story that all future images of Appalachia are rooted.

In *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, the fictional character, 'Devil Judd' Tolliver, is based on the real life of "Devil John" Wright, the sheriff of Wise County, Virginia during the late 1800s and early 1900s. A photo of Wright is shown below. A second historical character in the novel is "The Red Fox", Marshall Benton Taylor, whose photograph is also shown below. This individual was famed as a mediator, faith healer and herbalist.



Devil John Wright, Wise, Va.



Marshall Benton Taylor, The Red Fox, Wise County, Virginia, ca. 1900

The Trail of the Lonesome Pine (1909): Origin of the Appalachian Woman Archetype

“She sat at the base of the big tree—her little sunbonnet pushed back, her arms locked about her knees, her bare feet gathered under her crimson gown and her deep eyes fixed on the smoke in the valley below”. With these opening words, Fox gives us his young heroine, June Tolliver, and introduces the archetypal Appalachian woman to the larger world. She is beautiful, with long, golden hair, dark brown eyes and an independent spirit. But as Fox’s narrative continues, he paints her also as a wild creature, one unfamiliar with culture and civilization.

“With a thumping heart she pushed slowly forward through the brush until her face, fox-like with cunning and screened by a blueberry bush, hung just over the edge of the cliff, and there she lay, like a crouched panther-cub, looking down. For a moment, all that was human seemed gone from her eyes, but, as she watched, all that was lost came back to them, and something more.”

As we learn, our heroine has just seen a handsome young man riding a black horse who is a stranger to these parts – ‘a furriner/foreigner’ – as Fox puts it.

The stranger had taken off his gray slouched hat and he was wiping his face with something white. Something blue was tied loosely about his throat. She had never seen a man like that before. His face was smooth and looked different, as did his throat and his hands. His breeches were tight and on his feet were strange boots that were the colour of his saddle, which was deep in seat, high both in front and behind, and had strange long-hooded stirrups.

The stranger, John/Jack Hale, is an engineer mapping tracks for the new railroad being built into the region; the rail system will transport coal and timber to the factories and cities of the East. The contrasting of June and John, rural and urban, Nature and Culture, primitive and modern, is one that has long been used as an archetypal trope not only by writers such as Rousseau and Locke, but which also echoes back to the origins of written human history-- being first recorded in the epic narrative of *Gilgamesh* of Babylonia. Usually, as in the present story, when these two oppositions meet, both the negative of Ignorance and the positive of Innocence possessed by Nature are lost simultaneously. Eve reaches for the forbidden fruit. Knowledge is gained, but Eden is forever destroyed. And so Fox tells it again for Appalachia.

A second archetypal marker Fox employs to demonstrate the Otherness of Appalachia is to segregate the Appalachian dialect from ‘standard’, i.e., modern, contemporary, English. Linguistically, Appalachian is a blend of archaic English and rural Scots-Irish. The exchange below is between Jack Hale and June’s father, Devil John Tolliver, upon their first meeting.

“Damn ye,” the father said hoarsely, raising the rifle. “I’ll give ye—”
“Don’t, Dad!” shrieked a voice from the bushes. “I know his name, hit’s Jack”. The mountaineer dropped the butt of his gun to the ground and laughed. “Oh, air YOU the engineer?... ”
(When Jack tells him not to joke around with the rifle, the father replies:)
“Twusn’t no joke, ... An’ I don’t waste time skeering folks. I reckon you don’t know who I be?”
(Jack indicates he does not know the man’s identity, but resents being threatened.)
“No use gittin’ mad, young feller... I mistaken ye fer somebody else, an’ I axe yer pardon. When you git through fishin’ come up to the house right up the creek thar an’ I’ll give ye a dram.”

Jack agrees to come to the Tollivers’ house, which Fox describes below:

The beech leaves gave back the gold of the autumn sunlight and a little ravine, high under the crest of the mottled mountain, was on fire with the scarlet of maple.... When he got to the bare crest of a little rise, he could see up the creek a spiral of blue rising swiftly from a stone chimney. Geese and ducks were hunting crawfish in the little creek that ran from a milk-house of logs, half hidden by willows at the edge of the forest, and a turn in the path brought into view a log-cabin well chinked with stones and plaster, and with a well-built porch. A fence ran around the yard and there was a meat house near a little orchard of apple-trees, under which were many hives of bees. This man had things “hung up” and was well-to-do.

In this passage Fox creates the iconic “good” version of the log cabin (we will encounter the “bad” version later on). It is autothchonous – seeming to rise from the earth and embody the original use of natural resources, e.g., stone, wood, meats, fruits, perfected by the early settlers.

Even the livestock are self-sufficient. Upon entering the house, Fox encounters a similar tableau of positive, iconic Appalachian furnishings – dried peppers for seasoning, tobacco for smoking and chewing, quilts for comfort and beauty, rifles and revolvers for hunting and defense.

Strings of dried red and green pepper pods and twisted tobacco hung from hooks beside of the fire; and in one corner, near the two beds in the room, hand-made quilts of many colours were piled several feet high. On wooden pegs above the door where ten years before would have been buck antlers and an old-fashioned rifle, lay a Winchester; on either side of the door were auger holes through the logs... and another Winchester stood in the corner. From the mantel the butt of a big 44-Colt's revolver protruded ominously. On one of the beds in the corner, he could see the outlines of a figure lying under a brilliantly figured quilt...

The home Hale has entered in Fox's book is that of "Devil" Judd Tolliver, who – although Fox had no way of knowing this when he wrote the book -- is the surname of a Melungeon family (Hirschman 2005) who were, and are, among the earliest settlers of the region. (The Tolliver name was originally Talliaferro and they were Sephardic Jews; hence their black eyes and black hair; locally they were called "the black Tollivers").

The narrative then describes in detail what Fox views as the historical origins of the Appalachian people and their current culture:

You see, mountains isolate people and the effect of isolation on human life is to crystallize it. These people... have had no navigable rivers, no lakes, no wagon roads... They have been cut off from all communication with the outside world. They are a perfect example of an arrested civilization and they are the closest link we have with the Old World. ...They live like the pioneers; the axe and the rifle are still their weapons, and they still have the same fight with nature.

Another passage describes Fox's view of the social life and recreational activities then typical of Appalachia:

Every Saturday there had been local lawlessness to deal with [in town]. The spirit of personal liberty that characterized the spot was traditional. Here for half a century the people of Wise County and of Lee, whose border was but a few miles down the river, came to get their wool carded, their grist ground and farming utensils mended. Here, too, elections were held viva voce under the beeches.... Here were the muster-days of wartime.

Here on Saturdays the people had come together during half a century for sport and horse-trading and to talk politics. Here they drank apple-jack and hard cider, chaffed and quarreled and fought fist and skull. Here the bullies of the two counties would come together to decide who was the "best man."...On election days the country people would bring in ginger-cakes made of cane-molasses, bread homemade of Burr flour, and moonshine and apple-jack which the candidates would buy and distribute through the crowd. And always during the afternoon, there were men who would try to prove themselves the best Democrats in the State of Virginia by resort to tooth, fist and eye-gouging thumb.

The attitudes and activities Fox describes came to form the basis for contemporaneous understandings of Appalachia. By the 1930s this image of Appalachia and its people permeated American culture. But often the characteristics had transmogrified from the archetypes Fox describes to stereotypes that would be used to denigrate Appalachia and Appalachian people. Now we consider one last marker of Appalachian culture pointed out by Fox – cousin-to-cousin marriages. Fox brings up this topic early on in his narrative, when the daughter of Judd Tolliver, June, is described as being 'spoken for' by her cousin, David Tolliver.

He had gone over there to see his little cousin—the girl whom he had marked, (i.e., picked) when she was even more of a child than she was now, for his own. His people understood it, as did her father, and, child though she was, she, too, understood it.

Fox views this practice as a sign of cultural degeneration within the Appalachian population and this prejudice was carried forward to later decades, as we shall see. However, it is important to point out here that – for those readers who may similarly find cousin-to-cousin pairings (i.e., endogamy) objectionable -- that the royal family of Britain was engaging in cousin-to-cousin marriages during this same time period and that Queen Victoria, herself, had married her first cousin – Duke Albert of Sax-Coburg and Gotha. In fact, cousin marriages have been and remain common-place (and considered desirable) among several Middle Eastern ethnic populations such as Palestinian Arabs, Saudi Arabians, Persians, and both Sephardic and Ashkenazic

Jews (Hirschman 2005). Such marriages reinforce family bonds and consolidate family financial resources (Hirschman 2005)

Industrialization and Transportation

Fox's narrative next turns to discussing the arrival of industrialization and rail transportation systems in the region during the late 1800s and early 1900s when Appalachia was discovered to have deep, rich veins of both coal and iron ore – two ingredients then in enormous demand for steel making. Fox uses his protagonist Jack Hale as his *deus ex machina* to illustrate how these minerals were discovered and the social and economic impact they had on the region. Sent by his back-East employer to locate coal deposits, Hale locates a rich vein on Tolliver's property and realizes that it could be very profitable to mine:

That coal, ... rich as oil, above water, five feet in thickness, easy to mine, with a solid roof and perhaps self-drainage, if he could judge from the dip of the vein: and a market everywhere—England, Spain, Italy, Brazil. The coal, to be sure, might not be persistent—thirty yards within it might change in quality to ordinary bituminous coal, but he could settle that with a steam drill.

Capitalism and industrialization have reared their heads. We next learn that Hale, himself, has pioneer Appalachian roots:

One of his forefathers had been with Washington on the first historic expedition into the wilds of Virginia. His great-grandfather had accompanied Boone when that hunter first penetrated the "Dark and Bloody Ground," had gone back to Virginia and come again with a surveyor's chain and compass to help wrest it from the red men.... That compass and that chain his grandfather had fallen heir to and with that compass and chain his father had earned his livelihood amid the wreckage of the Civil War.

Hale followed in their upwardly-mobile footsteps by attending college and becoming a professional engineer. But with his education and his embracing of 'engines', he gained something else – greed. He observes that the Appalachian hills are filled with low-lying "gaps", ideal for train transportation and iron smelting:

All railroads, to east and to west, would have to pass through those gaps; through them the coal must be brought to the iron ore, or the ore to the coal. Through these gaps water flowed between ore and coal, and the very hills between were limestone. Was there any such juxtaposition of the four raw materials for the making of iron in the known world? When he got that far in his logic, the sweat broke on his brows; he felt dizzy and he got up and walked into the open air. As the vastness and certainty of the scheme— what fool could not see it?—rushed through him full force, he could scarcely get his breath. There must be a town [built] in one of those gaps—but in which? No matter—he would buy all of them—all of them, he repeated over and over again; for some day there must be a town in one, and someday a town in all, and from all he would reap his harvest

And indeed, this was the attitude that took root among a subset of Appalachian residents as the late 1800s became the 1900s – especially those who had been educated "back East". They returned to their homes possessing not only worldly educations, but also worldly aspirations -- with the desire to become "coal barons", "iron barons", "timber barons" or "railroad barons". They would establish principalities in the mountains and the surrounding population would become their serfs.

The Boom

Fox vividly describes what happens next to Appalachia.

The in-sweep of the outside world was broadening its current now. The Improvement Company had been formed to encourage the growth of the town [i.e., Wise, Virginia]. A safe was put in the back part of a furniture store behind a wooden partition, and a bank was started. Up through the Gap and toward Kentucky, more entries were driven into the coal, and on the Virginia side were signs of stripping for iron ore. A furnace was coming just as soon as the railroad could bring it in, and the railroad was pushing ahead with genuine vigor. Speculators were trooping in and the town had been divided off into lots—a few of which had already changed hands. One agent had brought in a big steel safe and a tent and was buying coal lands right and left. More young men drifted in from all points of the compass. A tent-hotel was put at the foot of Imboden Hill, and of nights there were under it much poker and song. The lilt of a definite optimism was in every man's step and the light of hope was in every man's eye.

This description could be applied to virtually every economic “boom” in American history – from the founding of tobacco and cotton ‘cash crop’ plantations in Colonial times, to the California ‘Gold Rush’ to the ‘Oil Boom’ in Pennsylvania and Oklahoma. Speculators enter an agrarian economy seeking riches from a natural resource, land prices escalate, society becomes hierarchically structured, the natural resource is depleted and the economy collapses.



Ghost town in Northern California dating from the Gold Rush



Ghost town in Pennsylvania dating from the Oil Boom.

The Crash

The Appalachian coal, timber and iron ‘boom’ lasted for approximately 20 years – from 1880 to 1900. Thus, at the time of Fox’s novel (1909), the economy in Appalachia had already collapsed. Most of the speculators lost their fortunes and left the region as quickly as they had entered it. The remaining Appalachian people were left with the detritus of ‘modernization’. As Fox describes it:

But in time, as the huge steel plants grew noiseless, and the flaming throats of the furnaces were throttled, a sympathetic fire of dissolution spread slowly... until, all up and down the Cumberland, the fox and the coon and the quail could come back to their old homes on the corner lots.

So Appalachia was left much as it was found – the human culture largely left unchanged. Fox's best-selling novel became the prevailing narrative by which those outside Appalachia came to understand the region.

Into this collapse came a librarian named Horace Kephart who was interested in 'roughing it' in the wilderness. Kephart spent the next two decades exploring the Appalachians and living among the inhabitants. The result was *Our Southern Highlanders* (1913), a work still often-cited both by Appalachian folk and 'outsiders'. Although criticized by some as unreliable or exaggerated, his grasp of the Mountain dialect, food patterns, family structure, and personalities, especially the sense of extreme self-sufficiency, is quite accurate for that time period.

Appalachian Archetypes during the 1930s: Li'l Abner and John Fox Redux

In 1934 America was in the midst of the Great Depression. Factory and agricultural output had fallen dramatically since the Wall Street boom of the 1920s. For most of the United States, newspapers served as the mass medium of choice. Times were difficult, and respite from bad news was welcomed. Into this setting burst a funny and remarkably fresh cartoon – *Li'l Abner*. Its creator was Al Capp (ne Caplan). The first cartoon in the series (shown below) depicted a family of Appalachian 'hillbillies', the Yokum family (though Capp stated this was a 'made-up' surname, it is commonly found in Appalachia; for example, singer Dwight Yoakum was born in Pikeville, KY. The surname is likely a corruption of the Spanish-Sephardic name Joachim, just as Tolliver is a corruption of Talliaferro).

The father, Pappy Yokum, wears overalls and is illiterate. The mother, Mammy Yokum, wears a bonnet, smokes a corncob pipe and enjoys sitting in her rocking chair. Their son, Li'l Abner, is 6 feet 3 inches tall, bathes daily in the creek and usually goes barefoot. Capp depicts the family living on a hill in a one-door, one-window log cabin, complete with pigs in the yard and an outhouse. (As promised in Chapter One, this is the "bad" version of the log cabin).

Depression-weary Americans immediately embraced the Yokum family ("Wonderful ! They are worse off than we are!") and the comic strip soon grew to a circulation of 900 US newspapers with 60 million readers. It was carried by over 100 foreign newspapers and 28 countries outside the United States (cites). *Li'l Abner* is widely credited as 'introducing' most of America, Canada and Europe to the Appalachian lifestyle it portrayed (cites). The fictional behaviors of Dogpatch's 'hillbillies', their language, their mating customs (Sadie Hawkins Day, Marryin' Sam), their tobacco and liquor usage, their dietary habits, were widely viewed as authentic representations of Appalachian culture (cites).

In the two early 'strips' below, we not only see the Yokum's home, yard, and apparel, but also learn that only Li'l Abner is literate. (In later years, Mammy also becomes able to read). Reference is made, as well, to the perceived Appalachian proclivity toward witching spells, natural magic, folk remedies and herbal medicine.





The Trail of the Lonesome Pine Motion Picture (1936)

Although two prior cinematic versions of the John Fox (1908) novel were made – the first in 1921, the second in 1929 – the one most relevant for our purposes in tracing the archetypes of Appalachia is the 1936 film. Starring prominent actors Henry Fonda, Fred McMurray and Sylvia Sydney, this was the first motion picture using outdoor scenes shot in the new technology of Technicolor. Technicolor made it possible to show the scenery of the Appalachian region to its best advantage, providing audiences with a vivid look at an area of the country few had actually seen in person.



Iconic Image of Appalachia from *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*

The film opens with a violent shootout between two ‘feuding’ families, the Tollivers and the Fallins (based on the Hatfield-McCoy feud). No explanation is provided for the enmity between these two groups; it is simply a ‘given’. Simultaneously, a Tolliver woman is shown giving birth in a plank-board cabin. She asks God to bring peace to the region for the sake of her newborn child.



Henry Fonda as David Tolliver in *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*

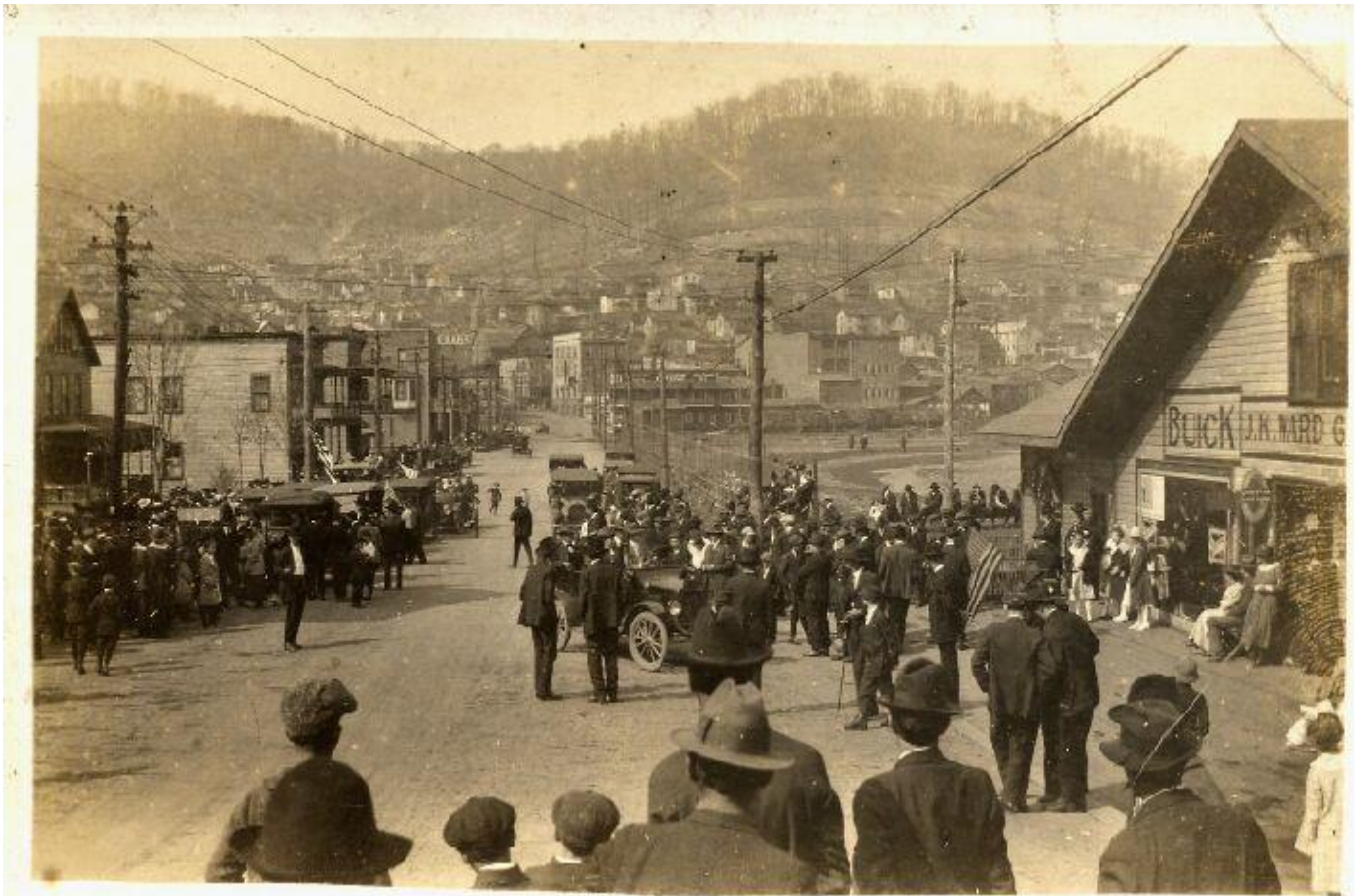
The narrative then moves forward approximately 20 years to find the same family enmity in place.

As we know from John Fox’s novel, a stranger, Jack Hale (Fred McMurray), rides into the area surveying for the railroad. He is dressed in a corduroy suit and wears a tie and hat. Jack is seen by teenaged June Tolliver (Sylvia Sydney) and invited home by her father, Judd. The Tolliver homestead is depicted as large and made from wooden planks (not the log cabin in Fox’s description), and there are multiple barefoot children playing in the yard with the dogs and chickens.

June’s handsome cousin, Dave Tolliver (Henry Fonda) is also at the house. Dave has a gunshot wound from a recent altercation with the Fallins. Jack Hale expertly tends it, removing the infected tissue. This, of course, demonstrates his greater medical knowledge versus the folk healing of the Tollivers. (Notably, the Tollivers are all portrayed as dark haired with dark complexions, consistent with Fox’s description of the family and also consistent with their Sephardic ancestry).

The interior of the house is filled with icons of America’s pioneer past – powder horns, flintlock rifles, an open fireplace with blazing wood fire. The women-folk are shown preparing meals on the fire and serving food to the men who sit around a trencher table. (Importantly, this setting makes the cultural level of this time period in Appalachia much more atavistic than actually would have been the case. Most families at this time would have an iron ‘cook stove’ heated by wood or coal), but it suits the film-makers’ intention of contrasting the primitive/backward conditions of the Appalachian people with the arrival of modern technology and industrialization which Jack represents.

A photograph of Wise, Virginia ca. 1900, where the story was actually set by Fox, is shown below. As can be seen, there are multi-story brick buildings, telephone lines and even one Model T Ford vehicle present.



Wise, Va downtown scene: circa 1900.

Dave and Judd Tolliver both sign contracts with Jack Hale to permit coal mining on their land, using an 'X' as their signature. Hale then visits the Fallin family (where only the men in the family are shown) and obtains their permission to run the train track through their property. The Fallin family is depicted as more primitive/bestial than the Tollivers – dirty clothes, unkempt hair, poor diction, violent behaviors. As the story progresses, the Tollivers are presented as 'civilizable' Appalachian people – capable of learning to read and write, embracing technology and progress; whereas the Fallins are depicted as inherently sub-human.

An analogy can be drawn here to the depiction of different Native American tribes in contemporaneous fiction and motion pictures; for example, the Cherokee and Chickasaw usually were shown to be intelligent and capable of cultural advancement, while the Apache and Lakota Sioux were presented as inherently violent and untamable.

In the motion picture, railroad construction nears the Tollivers' coal vein and a large tent encampment is built at the base of their mountain. Workers from outside the area are brought in to the grade the rail bed, lay the tracks, and build the bridges required to transfer the coal from the mountains to waiting cities to the East. The local population is exposed for the first time to steam engines, steam shovels, road graders and electricity. Some residents view the arrival of progress positively, while others are threatened and angry that their traditional way of life is being eroded. Dave Tolliver has a negative view, in part because he sees Jack Hale as a rival suitor for June.

Although Dave Tolliver has already asked June to marry him and she consented, she has strong desires to gain an education, 'better herself', and marry Jack Hale. Throughout the film, Appalachian women are depicted as more educable, motivated to improve themselves, and ambitious than the Appalachian men. This same pattern can be seen in the "Li'l Abner" cartoon series. Mammy Yokum is shown to be more intelligent, literate and progressive than either her husband, Pappy, or her son, Abner.

As the local coal is mined, money begins flowing into the area. Jack encourages June to go to 'the city' (Louisville, KY) and get an education, which he offers to pay for, but her father and Dave Tolliver oppose it. They want her to continue in the subservient tradition of Appalachian women – and also likely fear her becoming smarter and more competent than they are.

As the story continues, June accepts Jack's offer of an education and goes to a 'finishing' school in Louisville, KY. A few years later, she returns on the train dressed in fashionable apparel, her hair shorter and styled -- a 'modern' woman circa 1906. But when her younger brother is killed accidentally by the Fallins, she demands that Dave Tolliver take revenge by killing a Fallin. In the gun fight, Dave is shot dead by one of the Fallins. The Fallin father then kills his own son in order to make peace between the families. At the close of the film, it is left unresolved what June will choose to do with her life. This ending is doubly depressing in that it suggests even education and exposure to "the finer things in life" cannot extinguish the violent impulses of Appalachian dwellers. They are inherently, and will always remain, a backward, violent and degenerative part of humanity.

Sargent York (1941)

Based on the real life of World War I hero, Alvin York, born in Eastern Tennessee near the Kentucky border, this film is significant for understanding the iconic meaning of Appalachia for several reasons. First, the film was very well received both by critics and the public, earning eleven academy award nominations and wins for Best Picture and Best Actor. Directed by Howard Hawks, the narrative recounts the life of Alvin York (played by Gary Cooper), who began as a rowdy, ne'er do well young man and became the most celebrated American soldier of World War I. Thus the narrative is a tale of redemption and personal triumph over early life challenges by an Appalachian man -- a distinct break with the presentations we have examined so far.

Ideologically, the film presents a contrasting thesis about the nature of Appalachian men with that put forward in *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. As will be recalled, the *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* ended with the depressing conclusion that Appalachian people were inherently less evolved than the modern men and women who dwelled in cities, their skills and traditions part of a long-gone and now irrelevant past. But in 1940, the United States reluctantly entered the Second World War and suddenly a different set of cultural priorities came to the fore: i.e., when the shit hits the fan, we need men who can shoot! And so, the story of Sergeant Alvin C. York, of Pall Mall, Tennessee became not only relevant, but highly useful as a recruiting tool for the US Army.

The film opens at an evening church service in the little town of Pall Mall, TN in 1916. The town, itself, consists of a few clap-board buildings and a dirt street, much like the mining town in *Lonesome Pine*. The service is disrupted by three drunken young men who are riding by on their horses and shooting at tree trunks. One of them is Alvin York (Gary Cooper), whose widowed mother and younger siblings are attending the service.

The next day the mother asks the preacher (Walter Brennan), who also serves as the town's post master and operates the general store, for advice on what to do about her unruly son. The mother is portrayed as very "Appalachian-looking" with a bonnet, high cheek bones, and a long skirt with loose blouse. She trades eggs for the items she needs from the store, having no "cash money". She returns home to talk to Alvin about his future. The York homestead very much resembles those in both *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* and *Li'l Abner*, i.e., a small, run-down, plank-board house perched on a steep mountainside. Meanwhile, Alvin and his two buddies are getting drunk across the state line in Kentucky and soon get into a fist fight with other bar patrons.



Gary Cooper on his family farm in *Sergeant York*. Note the mule, overalls and felt hats

When he returns home, a hung-over Alvin plows his rocky farmland with a mule and wooden plow. That evening, he and his younger brother go hunting with their hound for the fox which is stealing the family's chickens. Two significant events occur on this hunt. First, Alvin passes by the famous tree on which Daniel Boone carved his name with the date he killed a bear (1760), reminding us that, in fact, these Appalachian folks are the descendants of the American pioneers. (The tree is actually farther east in Tennessee near Jonesboro). Second, he becomes re-acquainted with a beautiful brunette young woman who, as Alvin puts it, "You sure grew-up all of a sudden like".



Caption: While out hunting, Alvin meets the young woman he wants to marry.

That evening Alvin asks his mother what kind of property a man needs to get married, e.g., land, house, furniture, livestock. His mother advises him while she sits at a spinning wheel near an open fireplace (both of these would likely not be in use in 1916, but the symbolic intent is to recall the pioneer Appalachian lifestyle). Pondering the idea of marriage to the young woman he has met, Alvin decides to change his ways and with genuine commitment makes a deal to purchase some productive farmland, so they can marry.

He earns the needed money by working at many hard-labor tasks and also winning a turkey shoot with his spectacular marksmanship. Unfortunately, the land-owner cheats him, selling the property to Alvin's rival for the young woman's affections. Alvin goes on a drunken bender. Returning home, he is struck by lightning, his rifle is destroyed, but he and his horse survive. Alvin views this as a sign from God that he must forsake violence and guns.



Caption: Alvin decides to abandon violence and embrace religion.

Transformed, Alvin begins working as a tenant farmer and becomes a lay minister in the local church. He teaches Sunday school classes about the Ten Commandments, emphasizing "thou shalt not kill". Shortly thereafter, the United States enters World War I; all able-bodied men are sent draft notices. Because of his new religious beliefs about killing, Alvin applies for Conscientious Objector status. His application is put under review, and he is sent to boot camp. Prior to leaving, he asks his girlfriend to marry him when he returns, and she agrees. He tells her, "I'll be a'comin' back".

Once Alvin arrives for basic training, several strong ideological threads are pursued in the narrative. First, although Alvin is an ignorant country boy, he can shoot a rifle and go through obstacle courses better than any of the other recruits. Suddenly, all that Appalachian backwardness, primitiveness and hunting experience becomes an advantage. Most new army recruits have never left the city, never camped out, and never fired a gun. Cultural advantage and disadvantage are reversed.

Yet Alvin tells his superiors that he will not shoot to kill another person; the officers realize his beliefs are sincere. They give him a leave to go home and 'think about things'. He does so and again encounters the Daniel Boone tree carving: "D. Boon killed a Bar here 1760". He decides he will fight in the war to "protect American freedoms as Boone did". His superior officers are very happy and promote him to Corporal.



Caption: Sargent Alvin York and his rifle

During the deadly battle of the Meuse-Argonne during the autumn of 1918, American troops fought alongside British, Australian and French soldiers in a violent clash that lasted five weeks and claimed over 110,000 lives. In the film, American patriotic hymns are played on the soundtrack, while Allied soldiers rush across open ground against entrenched German machine gun installations. Realizing this frontal charge will lead to massive casualties, Corporal York works his way behind the nearest machine gun nest and kills the German soldiers operating it. He continues this pattern, ultimately killing 25 German soldiers and obtaining the surrender of 132 others. Accompanied by seven American soldiers, he then takes his prisoners to his commanding officers, telling them, “I had to stop them guns from killing people”.

York is awarded combat medals from Britain, France and the United States; he arrives back in America to a ticker-tape parade in New York City. Turning down opportunities to commercialize himself, York returns to Tennessee and marries his sweetheart. The local people have purchased the land he wanted and built a house for the new couple.

Now let us ‘un-pack’ these events. First, the central story is historically accurate in most regards as presented by the film. What must also be attended to, however, is the political purposes the film was used to promote. In 1940, the United States entered World War II. Most Americans *opposed* entering the war, just as they had World War I. The Atlantic and Pacific Oceans were still viewed by many as sufficient obstacles to prevent European and Asian powers from attacking the United States. Thus, the US military and President Roosevelt faced an uphill battle in convincing Americans that military intervention and the conscription of soldiers was justified and appropriate. *Sergeant York* was an ideal vehicle with which to accomplish this and Gary Cooper was the ideal choice to play Alvin York. As one film critic noted, “he sustained a screen persona that represented the ideal American hero” (cite).

The real Alvin York is shown in the photograph below taken in 1916 as he was returning to the Army. His mother does have very typical Appalachian features with high cheekbones and an aquiline nose. Their clapboard farm house with wooden steps is in the background.



Caption: The real Alvin York and his mother.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The period from 1900 to the end of the 1930s was formative not only for the United States' view of itself, but especially for its perception of Appalachia and Appalachian people. What remained consistent through this forty year period was the belief that Appalachia was a place and a people **set apart** from the larger country in which they were embedded. While most of America saw itself as transforming into a powerful, industrializing nation to be reckoned with on the world stage, Appalachia was viewed as a remnant of what was being left behind – both good and bad.

The Good was represented by persons such as Alvin York who had extraordinary skills as a warrior and a moral conscientiousness many sensed was being eclipsed by the growing greed and dishonesty within America's industrial elite. The Bad, of course, was to be found in characters such as the Yokums, the Fallins and the Tollivers; characters whose ignorance, violence and lack of moral integrity made most Americans feel superior both culturally and intellectually. They were better than – and better off than – those ignorant hillbillies dwelling back in the mountains.

This is the first of a series of research studies into the cultural meaning of Appalachia and its people. Later studies will examine the changes wrought during the Post World War II era through the 1960s, the 'rediscovery' of Appalachia as a vital source of cultural meanings during the 1970s to the 1990s, and the extension of underlying stereotypes, both positive and negative, into the 2000s. Throughout these later studies we will see some heroic archetypes, for example the Appalachian Woman, emerge as among the most powerful voices of American values carrying into the 21st Century.

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